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Putting old heads on young shoulders: helping social work students uncover the neoliberal hegemony.

Abstract

This paper explores the suggestion that younger students and social workers are more accepting of neoliberal social work practices than their older counterparts, understanding social problems more readily as failings of individual behaviour rather than as produced by societal forces such as inequality, poverty and punitive social policy. The suggestion is made that the acceptance of a hegemonic view of people in poverty and other difficulties, which is simple and reductionist and therefore easy to grasp, can only be challenged by sophisticated critical thinking. Assignment results from two modules within one social work programme which significantly correlate marks attained and student age are considered in the light of the suggestion that younger students are struggling with critical thinking and therefore with deconstructing the neoliberal hegemony.

Suggestions are made for social work education including an increasing emphasis on social justice knowledge and empathy in relation to people vulnerable to the harsh realities of neoliberal policy. Social empathy is suggested as a way forward.

Key words

Students, Critical Thinking, Neoliberalism, Age

Introduction

This paper explores the suggestion that younger students and social workers are more accepting of neoliberal social work practices than their older colleagues, and understand social problems more readily as failings of individual behaviour, rather than as produced by societal forces such as inequality, poverty and punitive social policy (Author’s own, 2014).

Marston (2013, p. 132) refers to this individualising of social problems as a ‘moralising self-sufficiency discourse’ and many authors writing in social work academia have expressed concerns about its impact on social work (for example, Ferguson, 2008; Lymbery, 2014; Rogowski, 2015). Levitas (2005) states that said discourse has become increasingly potent since the mid-90s and is a product of free market, individualistic thinking; in other words, neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism

Locating a 'moralising self-sufficiency discourse' within a neoliberal framework firstly requires an understanding of neoliberalism and its impact on social work. Ferguson (2008, p. 24) defines neoliberalism as:

> A political and economic strategy…..to address the crisis of profitability which was exposed by the oil crisis of 1973. Its overriding concern was with restoring the health of capitalist economies – in particular, through increasing profitability.

Garrett (2010, p. 343) clarifies this further and outlines several 'defining characteristics of neoliberalism' including the erosion of 'embedded liberalism' which was the dominant political ideology in the west, post-WW2 until the late 1970s. 'Embedded liberalism' meant that market functioning and corporate activity was kept in check by governmental regulation, and the eradication of this regulation and an increase in competition at all levels characterises the neoliberal project. Also, there was a significant alteration to the function and purpose of the state, which became primarily concerned with fostering conditions in which capital accumulation could flourish and involved significantly redistributing wealth to the richest in society. As Eagleton-Pierce (2016, p. xiv) states, there was, 're-engineering of government as an 'entrepreneurial' actor', achieving redistribution by privatisation, cuts to spending on welfare and deregulation of businesses (allowing the erosion of workers' rights, for example). This activated an increase in the insecurity felt by people in relation to employment, the underpinning neoliberal assumption being that unemployment is always a conscious choice because below a certain wage, people will not work. This wage, according to neoliberal thinking, is at the same level as welfare benefit payments and justifies harsh austerity measures under the auspices of 'making work pay' (Cameron, 2015).

One clear theme that permeates the above depiction of neoliberalism is 'individual responsibility' and the notion of a hard-working, independent, self-sufficient, competitive worker who does not rely on the state for 'handouts' but looks after themselves and their family by independent means. This notion again justifies cut- backs to welfare and to the agencies that work on behalf of people who are not 'making it' and increasing the rewards (wealth accumulation) for those who are 'successful.' As Eagleton-Pierce (2016, p. 157) states:

> The theme of individual responsibility resurfaced in the rhetoric of all prime ministers over the neoliberal period, from Margaret Thatcher's assertions that the welfare state eroded the virtues of hard work, through Tony Blair's claims that 'benefit scroungers' should not exploit other tax-payers, to David Cameron's appeal to volunteerism as the solution for a 'broken society.'

This theme is supported by a very powerful, media discourse of 'people like that' (unemployed, scrounging and amoral) (Author's own, 2016). Warner (2015, p. 225), for example, cites an article written in the *News of the World,* after the death of Peter

Connolly (‘Baby P’) under the headline ‘Evil and Idle’ which stated: ‘When a truly abhorrent crime happens, you can be sure of one thing: it’ll have taken place in a welfare ghetto.’ Garrett (2017, p. 51) also discusses the lexicon of ‘welfare dependency’ as an illustration of the hegemonic view of people claiming welfare benefits as ‘stuck in the quagmire of dependency because of personal deficits and shortcomings.’ This pervasive discourse, then, leads to public support for austerity measures and tougher law and order policies, as seen in the hardening of attitudes to people in poverty (JRF, 2014). ‘Hegemony’ is a term coined by Gramsci (1971) to encompass the ways in which the ruling government obtains consent to operate in the way it wants. A vital mechanism is that the key players in civic life agree and perpetuate the governmental, hegemonic discourse. In the current context, a neoliberal and self-sufficiency discourse is perpetuated as above, and, as a player in civic life, social work increasingly reflects that agenda.

Given that a neoliberal political context has existed since the late 1970s, and, as Levitas notes, individualistic rhetoric has been increasing since the mid-90s, is it reasonable to suggest that younger students and social workers might have been more influenced by those ideas than their older colleagues who have had experience of a different, welfare democratic paradigm and possibly more extensive life experience? Might this mean that students and the newer generation of social workers then struggle to deconstruct neoliberalism and to think critically about it because they are so immersed in it?

As Marston (2013, p. 135) states: ‘it is also the case that beginning social workers are likely to be influenced by the dominant discourse of self-sufficiency, and the muted political agency that this discourse gives rise to.’ Pease (2013, p. 31) also states that ‘neoliberal ideas have penetrated the psyche of social workers’ thus posing a challenge that may have been much less in earlier generations. Monbiot (2016) suggests that people in general do not recognise neoliberalism as an ideology and suggests that problems caused by it are dealt with as isolated incidents rather than as issues having the same underlying cause. He states:

> So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology. We appear to accept the proposition that this utopian, millenarian faith describes a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin’s theory of evolution. But the philosophy arose as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power (Monbiot, 2016, n.p.).

So, this concealed but fundamental ideology is one which can lead to the ‘blame’ for social problems being placed on the shoulders of individuals in poverty and other difficult circumstances, congruent with a ‘moralising self-sufficiency discourse’. Even whilst we know of the influence of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010) and of poverty and shame (Gupta, 2015), we also need to be aware that swathes of the population simply blame the people who are victims of those issues hence the distorted and punitive beliefs people have about benefit fraud and the welfare budget (The

Independent, 2013). Why should students of social work believe anything different?

The Impact on Social Work Students

Continuing the theme of the individualisation of social problems, which McLaughlin (2008) describes as a degrading of political thinking to the individual level, several authors have found that there appears to be a stronger tendency towards this way of thinking among younger workers and students. Author's Own (2014), for example, found that younger social workers in a criminal justice setting in Scotland objected significantly less to the manifestations of neoliberalism (for example, more risk aversion and less welfare help) than their older colleagues. Several made statements such as 'this offending is through their own choice,' demonstrating a very individual- responsible neoliberal view. Gilligan (2007) found that age had a significant effect on how entrants to a social work programme viewed social problems, with the group termed by the author as 'Thatcher's children' viewing problems as being created as a result of individual behaviour rather than caused by structural differences. Lafrance, Gray and Herbert (2004) found that practice educators expressed concern that students did not consider the social conditions or systemic factors that affected service users and Woodward and Mackay (2012) found that year one social work students had problems applying social justice values, but could understand and apply interpersonal and individual-level values. The problem of application persisted into year three. Norstrand (2017) writing about social work students in Norway, found that practice educators were quite vocal in their criticisms of students who came to the programme straight from school. They felt that students lacked humility and had a reductionist and simplified view of how service users should solve their problems.

Beddoe and Keddell (2016, p. 151) state that 'social work students, whose whole lives have been immersed in contexts where the structural explanations of social problems have been downplayed or invisible, are arriving in western tertiary institutions' and go on to suggest that this is exacerbated by employing and state agencies where the social justice mission of social work is very seriously contested (for example, The Guardian, 2013). The authors suggest that students are not only entering social work education steeped in neoliberal hegemony or 'common sense' but are leaving to contexts that have also become detached from welfare and social justice norms and are increasingly characterised by neoliberal, individual responsibilisation. For example, Rogowski (2015, p. 105) states:

> In brief, following several decades of changing conceptions, policies and practice in relation to child maltreatment, concerns include increased bureaucracy and targets enforced by managers and an authoritarian desire to responsibilise parents regardless of their economic and social circumstances.

Nicolas (2015), writing as a very experienced social worker in child protection in England, suggests that social work should stop 'pretending' it is about social justice, when the reality it is that its practice is defined by a narrow definition of protection and centres on risk definition and management. The description of her daily work is

congruent with the bleak picture painted by Rogowski.

In summary then, there are extensive neoliberal influences on students and new workers from a ubiquitous and all-consuming ideology, supported by a powerful media, and from many social work agencies themselves where a neoliberal framework has been adopted and goes unquestioned in daily practice.

Module assignment performance

Three years ago, a new module was introduced in the first year of an undergraduate social work programme at a Scottish university to help students uncover and critique the neoliberal hegemony and to look at how to apply the new learning to social work practice. It is to the analysis of student performance on that module that we now turn.

The module requires that students understand neoliberalism and its effects and consider the wider, political forces that act on people and affect their choices, behaviour and circumstances. The point of the module is to help students move beyond the individual level of practice (whilst acknowledging that relationship based practice is central to good practice). Issues of inequality, poverty, political policy such as austerity, media stereotyping and the emphasis on individual behaviour choices, are covered. The summative assignment at the end of the twelve week module asks the students to consider the impact of neoliberalism and societal and political forces upon a young man who is unemployed, homeless and getting into trouble with the police.

Methodology

Ethical approval to use existing assignment results data was obtained from the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee. A purely quantitative, positivist approach was taken to the analysis, as the purpose was to objectively ascertain whether age at the time of assignment submission had any statistical link to the performance in the assignment. Essentially, the investigation was to look at connections between variables (Pallant, 2010).

SPSS for Windows V.22 was used to analyse the secondary data which was held within the registry department of the university. Elective (non-social work) students were removed from the data and age at submission of assignment was utilised as the ‘age’ variable. All social work students were included in the analysis from the extant three years of the module (n=118). The numerical value of each grade was entered into SPSS along with the age of the student, and various statistical tests were conducted on the resultant data set.

Results

A correlation was conducted on the three years of marks and the age of the students (n = 118). Preliminary analyses were undertaken to ensure there were no significant concerns about assumptions: normality, linearity and homoscedasticity (Pallant, 2010). A medium strength, significant correlation was found to exist between the two variables, r= .310, n= 118, p = .001, with older ages being associated with better marks.

Next, the students were divided into two groups; those aged under 21 (n= 67) and those aged 21 and over (n=51), as 21 year olds would have been born in the mid-90s when Levitas (2005, p14) suggests that the 'moralising underclass discourse' (or Marston's (2013) moralising self-sufficiency discourse) began to gain marked purchase. An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare marks. There was a significant difference between the marks for the under 21 group (M= 12.46, SD= 4.22) and the 21 and over group (M= 14.92, SD= 4.39; t (116) = -3.08, p = .003 two-tailed). The effect size was medium (Cohen's d = -.6). This means that the older students attained significantly higher grades than younger students.

Although it might seem at this point that younger students were indeed struggling more with political thinking, it may be that the actual difference lay in academic critical thinking per se, not necessarily confined to political subject matter. To investigate this, the same student data but for a different module running parallel with the political thinking module and focusing on relationship-based practice was analysed. Although rooted in practice that takes place at the individual level (and therefore presumably more easily grasped by the students), the same level of academic rigour, application of literature and critical analysis was expected.

Firstly, the subject groups were compared to see if the marks for the modules were significantly different, by conducting an independent t-test on the two subject groups. There were 118 students in each group and a highly significant difference was found between the marks for the political thinking module (M= 13.53, SD = 4.45) and the relationship based practice module (M=15.84, SD = 3.96, t (234) = -4.22, p= .000, 2 tailed). The effect size was medium, (Cohen's d= -.55). This means that the students attained significantly lower marks for the political thinking module.

Next, a correlation was conducted between age and mark for the relationship-based practice module (n=118). Preliminary analyses were undertaken to ensure there were no significant concerns about assumptions (as above), and a small but significant correlation was found to exist between the two variables, r= .284, n= 118, p = .002, with older ages being associated with better marks.

A final independent samples t-test was conducted between the marks for students 21 and over (n=51), and those under 21 (n=67). There was a significant difference between the marks for the under 21 group (M= 15.18, SD= 3.92) and the 21 and over group (M= 16.71, SD= 3.89; t (116) = -2.10, p = .038, two-tailed). The effect size was small (Cohen's d =0.39). This means that the older students attained significantly higher grades than younger students.

In summary, the entire group of 118 students struggled significantly more in the assignment for the political thinking module than for the individual-level relationship based practice module. Also, within each module younger students struggled significantly more with the assignment than their older colleagues, with this difference being more marked in the political thinking module. Both of these findings are in keeping with the literature and ideas discussed thus far (for example, Lafrance, Gray and Herbert, 2004; Gilligan, 2007; Woodward and Mackay, 2012; Author's own, 2014).

Limitations

The results show that there may be a substantive issue in regards to age and assignment grade. However, the methodology describes a modest analysis of a single variable (age) related to performance. Any confounding effects of gender and ethnicity, for example, have not been accounted for. Having said that, the vast majority of students in each year group were white-UK and female. Caution must also be applied when interpreting correlation results as there can be a tendency to assume causation, when there might in fact be a further unexplored variable causing the relationship (Pallant, 2010). Differences between the modules must also be treated with caution due to different teaching styles, assignment requirements and markers for each assignment (although both markers were involved in moderation for both modules and, thus, a level of consistency was achieved). *Within*-module patterns were consistent across both modules. Finally, the reliance on quantitative data is a limitation and it might be that future qualitative study eliciting the students' voices in relation to how they experienced the assignment would be very useful.

Discussion

The core purpose of the module undertaken by the students in year one of their undergraduate degree is to expose the underpinning neoliberal hegemony or 'common sense' that may be unrecognised or completely taken for granted and to move students' understanding of practice beyond the individual level to one where notions of social justice apply. Having been subject to a context where neoliberalism has prevailed for almost forty years, it is unsurprising that students may find this challenging (Beddoe and Keddell, 2016). From the results, it seems clear that younger students struggled significantly with the conceptual and political thinking required to make sense of the assignment and this is congruent with the literature covered in the introduction.

Critical Thinking

The element that both modules have in common is the requirement for critical thinking (including drawing on academic literature); albeit that the relationship-based practice module has a more tangible basis for this. As Gray and Webb (2013, p. 7) state, 'critical social work…..is more often a form of critique than a direct emancipatory practice. Its goal is to enlarge (students') critical thinking.' Pease (2013) also suggest that it is of

utmost importance that social workers understand that society is not benign and neutral, but that it can have an oppressive and disadvantaging influence on people. Again, this takes critical thinking. A study by Sheppard and Charles (2017) looked at whether interpersonal skills and critical thinking skills were predictors of success within two undergraduate and two masters social work programmes in England. The results demonstrated that interpersonal skills were predictive across the board (including empathy and compassion), but that critical thinking skills were only predictive on the masters programmes (congruent with academic expectations at masters level). This means that critical thinking skills, on the undergraduate programmes, were irrelevant to the student doing well, or otherwise. Also, across all programmes, critical thinking skills did not improve. These are important and concerning findings and might suggest that the requirement to think critically does not feature in a consistent way across all social work programmes.

As covered in the introduction, a neoliberal understanding of social problems is easier to understand and can lead to social problems being attributed solely to individual 'bad' behaviour. Blair, Brown, Schoepflin and Taylor (2014) and other academics writing in the USA (Delavega, Kindle, Peterson and Schwartz, 2017; Frank and Rice, 2017; and Segal and Wagaman, 2017) discuss prevailing attitudes to poor people. The authors are congruent in their suggestions that most Americans believe being poor is as a result of bad choices or lazy, substandard behaviour. Poor people, therefore, get what they deserve. In the UK as already outlined, a similar discourse is perpetuated as part of the prevailing neoliberal hegemony. It seems then that the 'moralising self-sufficiency discourse' is still going strong in western, neoliberal democracies.

The individual level of practice, focused on changing behaviour, that results from this discourse is also easy for students to understand. Reductionist and simplified notions of 'anti-discriminatory practice' (Thompson, 2001) can also be absorbed into interpersonal, non-racist and non-sexist behaviour. Concepts of structural discrimination, inequality and lack of opportunity, especially when students are aware that people do have access to housing, welfare, schooling and health care, are much more difficult understand. For example, some students will analyse the young man in the assignment case study as being 'discriminated against' because people do not like criminals and will treat him badly. In other words, the analysis required to understand crime through a social justice framework is reduced to interpersonal bad treatment, or the 'P' level of Thompson's seminal PCS model of anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson, 2001).
Blair et al. (2014) developed a scale measuring mixed subject student attitudes to poor people, and found that views congruent with a moralising self-sufficiency discourse were very apparent. Most students in the study viewed welfare provision negatively and felt that too much money was given to people who had basic character flaws. This resonates with the famous view of Margaret Thatcher, who in 1979 began the wholesale transformation of the UK to one based on neoliberalism rather than social or welfare democracy:

> Nowadays there really is no primary poverty left in this country. In western countries we are left with the problems which aren't poverty. All right there might

> be poverty because they don't know how to budget, don't know how to spend their earnings, but now you are left with really hard fundamental character personality defect (Catholic Herald 1978, n.p.).

The second most important view was that poor people are different, and, in many cases, inferior. Blair et al concluded that what was required was increased empathy with poor people – enhanced understanding rather than increasing psychological distance.

In 2017, Delavega et al. studied attitudes to people in poverty among social work students, where the kind of opinions described above would be even more concerning. The authors researched whether students' levels of blame towards people living in poverty changed after social work education. The authors found that the most significant change centred on the belief that governments need to do more to help, but that changes in 'blaming' the poor for their poverty, although significant, only had a small effect size. It seems, then, that, congruent with Sheppard and Charles' study, compassion was increased (governments should help more), but critical thinking was less affected (the poor are still to blame for their poverty).

Overall, then, it seems that critical thinking might be an issue for social work students, especially younger students who, the results suggest, struggle more with this and who may have little life or work experience that might have challenged deeply held, implicit neoliberal assumptions. Emphasising critical thinking within programmes of study is also in direct opposition to current hegemonic condemnation of the poor, exemplified by John Major in 1993 who said 'Society needs to condemn a little more and understand a little less' in relation to youth crime (The Independent, 1993). Ferguson (2008, p. 131) also points out that attempts to understand or empathise are supplanted by superficial, individual behaviour explanations in a neoliberal form of social work which has a 'preference for a 'social work of surfaces' over deeper explanations of behaviour.'

Another issue that might contribute to the difficulty of challenging the 'moralising self-sufficiency discourse', is that neoliberal-leaning students may choose to engage less in classroom discussions due to fear of censure and disapproval. Students often find speaking out quite difficult more generally, especially when they are required to say difficult or controversial things (Oliver, Jones, Rayner, Penner & Jamieson, 2017). Flaherty, Ely, Meyer-Adams, Baer & Stuphen (2013), for example, found that conservative students felt discriminated against for their views, and were more likely to self-censor. Hansford, Ely, Flaherty & Meyer-Adams (2017) undertook a study with 500 social work students and also found that many of them perceived that they were treated in a discriminatory manner due to their conservative beliefs. For example, one student said: 'I've heard professors call conservatives names, and I've seen students nod and agree. I never hear any conservative ideas, but why would anyone want to speak up?' (Hansford et al., 2017, p. 206). The authors do, however, tease out the core tension here, by recognising that 'the promotion of social justice often allies with progressive leaning, or even liberal, socio-political ideas.' As a result, the authors suggest, teaching

social justice requires the ‘abandonment of political neutrality on the part of the social work educator’ (Hansford et al., 2017 p. 200). In effect, the authors are suggesting that, given that the social justice orientation in social work is progressive, that is, concerned with the fair distribution of resources (BASW, 2014; Author’s Own, 2016), social work educators perhaps need to articulate that politically within the classroom.

This tension was also explored by by Funge (2011) who undertook a study of social work academics and asked them to answer several questions including, ‘Can or should social work educators ensure that students align their practice orientation with their ethical responsibility to promote social justice?’ (Funge, 2011, p. 81). The author found that the majority of the academics were wary of committing to ‘ensuring’ a social justice alignment in their students. Instead, they believed that simply exposing students to other ways of thinking about social justice would lead to students absorbing those ideas. These educators, therefore, may have been politically explicit about challenging neoliberal ideas in the classroom (thus, perhaps, producing feelings of discomfort in more conservative students) and yet still stopped short of ‘ensuring’ that a social justice orientation was essential to success on the programme.

This may well have been due to instinctively recoiling from the notion of ‘forcing’ a progressive orientation on students. Author’s own (2014) questions whether this is enough; isn’t a social justice orientation, aligned to progressive beliefs fundamental to a student passing the course? Especially as, as espoused, social justice, a belief in redistribution of resources and non-discrimination are at the heart of social work values (BASW, 2014). Also, Canavan (2009, p. 48) rejects the assumption that ‘a coherent professional identity will emerge organically as an inevitable corollary of a broader generic process of professional socialisation’ and states that students need ‘knowledge of the economic determinants of social justice, linked to an explicit anti-poverty practice focus’ (Canavan, 2009, p. 62). It appears that this tension, then, between the natural congruence of social work values and commitment to social justice on one hand, and the concern that educators have about ‘abandoning political neutrality’ or insisting on a progressive social justice alignment on the other, remains unreconciled.

Two key issues have emerged from the discussion so far. The first is that younger students may struggle more with critical political thinking, and critical thinking more generally, than older students. This is illustrated by younger students attaining poorer grades in the assignments considered earlier. Secondly, students who hold entrenched or unquestioned neoliberal views about society may find it more difficult to speak out in class, thus exposing their ideas to less challenge or deconstruction. The case has been made that younger students, having known little alternative to neoliberal hegemony, may well hold unquestioned views about society. Considering these two key issues, it may be that younger students do have particular needs in relation to the critical, political thinking that is so necessary to be able to understand the societal position of many of the people on the receiving end of social work services.

Implications for social work education

The above findings clearly have implications for social work education. Social work programmes need to be able to meet the needs of all students, including younger students where there might be particular challenges in critical and political thinking. The very nature of social work programmes might need to be examined if we are to produce critically aware social workers who understand the reasons for punitive social policy and poverty discourses characterised by individual blame. If not, the profession risks becoming increasingly collusive in neoliberal hegemonic oppressive practices and, as such, increasingly detached from its unique value base and commitment to social justice. A study by Fazzi (2016) found that the increasing emphasis within Italian social work education on methodologies and technical-rational interventions led to a decrease in the creativity of students over the course of their social work programmes. The author suggests that this concerning finding was as a result of prescriptiveness of the programmes and students having learned the importance of institutionally related tasks as opposed to founding principles and values of the profession. As Fazzi (2016, p. 97) states:

> Social work is not just a purely technical or practical activity; it is also a political and transformative one. Designing educational programmes only in accordance with the requirements of the administrative and technical requirements of service delivery means losing sight not only of the role and goals of social work in modern societies, but also the origins and nature of the problems of the people who use social services.

Beddoe and Keddell (2016, p. 150) agree that social work education 'must equip social work students with a strong critical framework to enable them to deconstruct social policy, understand the psychosocial impact of stigma on service users and the effects of this on practice'. To do this, they suggest a two-part process combining cognitive and emotional elements.

Cognitive elements

The authors suggest that students need help to deconstruct 'poverty discourses' to open them up to question and critique. So, herein lies the absolute necessity of creating a classroom environment where neoliberal-leaning students can voice the beliefs they may hold which are not in line with underpinning social work values and commitment to a redistributive form of social justice. For example, occasionally students will ask questions along the lines of: 'But why should I pay taxes to help people who are on benefits and don't want to work'? This type of question usually draws some expressions of horror from students but also resonates with other students in the class who, perhaps, lack the courage to speak out. This, then, may be the first essential element in social justice classroom learning, allowing opinions to be voiced in order that the particular discourse can be, in a non-threatening way, explored and analysed. According to Hansford et al. (2017) this, perhaps, does not happen consistently and students may avoid voicing neoliberal opinions due to the perception that they are not in keeping with the party line. Beddoe and Kendell (2016, p. 152) also give examples such as the deconstruction of the populist poverty discourse, 'employment is the route out of poverty' and the introduction of an alternative discourse which includes information such

as the fact that 40% children in poverty have working parents.

The realisation that some students may not want to voice their neoliberal beliefs means that the onus is on the educator to do so; to raise issues from the media and neoliberal ideas of 'common sense.' Only in this way can the hegemony begin to be deconstructed. I am of the opinion that this is exactly what the political thinking module under analysis in this paper, did, and yet its impact was still muted in regards to younger students. This is where the second part of Beddoe and Keddell's approach becomes crucial: emotional elements.

Emotional elements

Beddoe and Keddell state that students need to see the discrepancies between how people in poverty are portrayed (dominant discourses) and the reality of their lives and also need to empathise with service users who are feeling the impacts of poverty and stigma and may feel shame and blame. Understanding and empathising with these feelings may then begin to foster outrage, felt in solidarity with those stigmatised, and thus lead to the desire to take action (Author's own, 2016). Clearly, this would also lead to an enhanced understanding of neoliberal underpinning assumptions, especially in circumstances where the student had been explicitly exploring those assumptions and discourses as suggested earlier.

Although in a study by Grant (2014), social work students in the UK self-assessed themselves as being quite highly empathetic, it cannot be assumed that the self assessments are correct nor that all social work students are empathetic. In consideration of the young man in the case study, students in my class have made comments such as: 'I don't know people like him and so I just have to guess.' The same issue, on a greater scale was found by Gair (2013, p. 144) who found that social work students in Australia would need further cultivation of empathy to allow respectful work with indigenous people. This is important because, as the author states: 'compassion or empathy for marginalized and scapegoated groups will mitigate against their further scapegoating, whereas a lack of empathy may perpetuate it.' However, the authors found that a common response among students was that they 'could not feel empathy because they had not experienced the situation.' This limited empathetic response is, in effect, exactly what students in my class sometimes articulate. It is also worthy of note that in the relationship-based practice module, which includes a significant emphasis on empathy, younger students also did less well. This may be the above idea playing out, that empathy was difficult to feel in the absence of knowledge about 'anyone like that.' Bloom (2016) points out that empathy can be like a spotlight; very illuminating for people near us and like us, but losing efficacy the more distant people are from what we know. This is not to suggest that younger students do not feel empathy but simply that a person's circle of empathic ability might increase with experience of many different kinds of people. Once again, qualitative research hearing from students about the difficulties they experience would be extremely valuable.

Beddoe and Keddell (2016) suggest the use of complex case studies, including elements that connect the service user to economic circumstances and structural

issues. They need to convey the inner world of the service user (Hennessey, 2011) and the impact of, for example, poverty and shame. They also suggest the use of the arts: fiction, poetry or paintings, for example, to, again, promote an engagement with the feelings and emotions of service users.

On reflection, the focus of the political thinking module under discussion in this paper was on the cognitive aspects of understanding inequality and poverty in general. Service users' voices, feelings and emotions were missing. Frank and Rice (2017) build on the work of Segal (2011, p. 267) on 'social empathy,' defined by as: 'the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations and as a result gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities.' This concept, therefore, brings together cognitive and emotional elements as detailed above, and should, according to the authors, lead to greater impetus for action on behalf of service users.

Conclusion

This paper utilised three years of assessment results for one first year undergraduate module, to help illustrate the suggestion that younger students and social workers struggle more with the deconstruction of neoliberal hegemony.

Reflecting upon the module content, and thinking about the cultivation of 'social empathy' (Segal, 2011) as a way to help students understand the learning in the module, it is clear that emotional and empathetic elements were under-emphasised in the teaching and learning. That empathy would be present was taken for granted by the module leader and this was a fundamental error. Although individual empathy development featured in the parallel, relationship-base practice module, individual empathy and emotional engagement should have been included in the political thinking module, as an intrinsic part of learning the factual information about poverty and inequality. Cognitive understanding of neoliberalism and its effects, structural oppression and resultant policy direction by the government, need to be taught alongside the voices of service users. Only then will their experience of poverty, inequality, shame and the struggle for survival and position in an increasingly competitive and harsh neoliberal context, be properly understood by those students with little experience of society as anything other than a benign entity.

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